



ESC Insight

Unofficial Guide to the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest



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The Unofficial Guide To The 2015 Eurovision Song Contest

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Foreword

Ewan's word...

Welcome to the 2015 Eurovision Song Contest Guidebook! Our team is growing, just as our beloved contest is also expanding. Eurovision started as a technological and cultural experiment in 1956, and is now a powerhouse of politics, passion, and pride. Only a contest like Eurovision could deliver such a showstopping winner in Conchita and 1 year later brings forward 40 more uncut 3-minute long gems for Europe to fall in love with.

Is it any wonder that the Eurovision Song Contest is the greatest show...*in the world*?

Samantha's word...

After sixty contests, Eurovision is showing no signs of age, and is still an innovative, relevant, and (most importantly) entertaining show for young and old. From all of us here at ESC Insight, we'd like to thank you for downloading this guidebook. Without our readers, listeners, and fans, we'd really just be talking to ourselves, and what fun would that be?

Here's to Sixty more!

Albania

At a Glance

Song: I'm Alive
Artist: Elhaida Dani
Composer: Arber Elshani, Kristijan Lekaj (Zzap'n'Chriss)
Lyricist: Sokol Marsi
Performing: 14th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Twenty-two year old Elhaida Dani is from the city of Shkodër, in the north of Albania. She is no stranger to competition; she won Albania's version of *Star Academy* in 2009, as well as the "New Stars" division of *Sunčane Skale* in 2011 and *Top Fest* in 2012, before crossing the Adriatic and winning *The Voice of Italy* with over 70% of the final vote. She was a participant in the 50th annual Festivali i Këngës, with "Mijëra vjet", but it was her second attempt, three years later, that saw her win FiK, and clinch the ticket to Vienna.

Albania in Eurovision

Appearances: 12
Debut: 2004
Victory: -
Best: 5th
- 2012: Suus, by Rona Nishliu, with 146 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012.

Recent History

2014: One Night's Anger, by Hersi Matmuja, 15th in the semi with 22 points
2013: Identitet, by Adrian Lulgjuraj & Bledar Sejko, 15th in the semi with 31 points.
2012: Suus, by Rona Nishliu, 5th with 146 points.
2011: Kenga Ime, by Aurela Gace, 14th in the semi with 57 points.

2015 National Final

Festivali i Këngës, now in its 53rd year, was once again chosen as the method of selecting Albania's representative at Eurovision. On December 28th, following two nights of semifinals where 26 songs were winnowed down to 18 finalists, a jury vote overwhelmingly backed Elhaida Dani and her song "Diell" for the win (she recieved maximum points from six of the seven jurors, including 2012 Eurovision alumna Rona Nishliu).

However, on February 23rd, as preparations were being made to edit "Diell" and translate it into English, the author of the song withdrew it, forcing broadcaster RTSH to pair Elhaida with a new entry for Vienna. "I'm Alive" was unveiled a few weeks later.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...

Festivali i Kenges finds the best song for Albania, not necessarily the best song for Eurovision, so switching to 'I'm Alive' is one of the smartest calls that could have been made. By leaving it late in the process, there's also a suspicion that the team listened to the overload of ballads and decided to do a little bit of counter programming.

My concern is that the lines between the choruses and verses is not distinctive enough. The refrain "speed of light" continues to stick in my head but the song is like being ravaged by a wet sponge. It should be exciting, but there is very little satisfaction.

Samantha says...

the fickle nature of "Diell"'s composer gave Albania the chance to conduct an intriguing experiment. The winner of the Festivali i Këngës is selected entirely via an all-Albanian jury, but what works in Tirana might not work in Lisbon, London, or Lodz. For the first time, the delegation had the chance to pick a song geared towards more international tastes. While the song they eventually selected might not have the instant catchiness of other songs this year, it allows Elhaida's voice to truly shine. It's more technically difficult than most of this year's ballads, which I think will let it stand out.

Your Notes

Armenia

At a Glance

Song: Face the Shadow
Artist: Genealogy
Composer: Armen Martirosyan
Lyricist: Inna Mkrtchyan
Performing: 2nd in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Genealogy is a six-person ensemble created especially for this year's Eurovision Song Contest. The members of the group come from all five continents, in addition to Armenia itself, symbolizing the spread of the Armenian diaspora worldwide.

Representing Europe is **Essai Altounian**, a 35-year-old singer-songwriter from Paris. Arizona-born 28-year-old **Tamar Kaprelian** will be representing the Americas. **Vahe Tilbian**, a 35-year-old from Ethiopia, will sing on behalf of the Armenian-African community. From Asia, we have 27-year-old Japanese-Armenian-American **Stephanie Topalian**, while Oceania will be represented by opera singer **Mary-Jean O'Doherty Basmadjian**, a 33-year-old Australian. Eurovision 2009 alumna **Inga Arshakyan** returns to the competition, representing Armenia and hoping to better her 10th place finish with "Jan Jan".

Armenia in Eurovision

Appearances: 9
Debut: 2006
Victory: -
Best: 4th
- 2008: Qele Qele, by Sirusho, with 199 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2006 – 2010, 2013 – 2014

Recent History

2014: Not Alone, by Aram Mp3, 4th with 174 points.
2013: Lonely Planet, by Dorians, 18th with 41 points.
2012: -
2011: Boom Boom, by Emmy, 12th in the semi with 54 points.

2015 Selection

Broadcaster AMPTV decided to conduct an internal selection for 2015, announcing the formation of one-off supergroup Genealogy on February 11. The artists were announced gradually, and by March 12th, the song and all of its singers had been revealed. Originally entitled "Don't Deny", the Armenian delegation decided to change the song's name to "Face the Shadow" in order to deflect accusations of making political statements.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...The UK had Band Aid's 'Do They Know It's Christmas' while the US had "We Are The World." Armenia's collection of artists from around the world brings to mind the worst excesses of the charity record - everyone gets the same number of lines, an excess of saccharine is used as connective tissue, and there's a thorny issue at the heart of the song. 'Face The Shadow' ticks all the boxes, including the slowly rising fury as the music crescendos to its operatic ending. I like my music to have some passion and grit, but this is far too clinical for my tastes.

Samantha says...I get what they're trying to do here. I honor the history, and the message they're sending, especially this year. In a way, it's almost funny: in a competition where people scoff at "the diaspora factor", Armenia is diving right into it and turning it into the focal point of the entry. Each individual member of Genealogy is talented in their own right, and the song has different elements within it that do work. However, when crammed into a single three-minute entry, it feels disparate and, well, desperate. My head goes back to 2013, when Macedonia attempted to blend modern pop and traditional Roma ululations. I love chocolate. I love hamburgers. I don't want Hershey's syrup on my Double-Double.

Your Notes

Australia

At a Glance

Song: Tonight Again
Artist: Guy Sebastian
Composer: Guy Sebastian, David Ryan Harris, Louis Schoorl
Lyricist: Guy Sebastian, David Ryan Harris, Louis Schoorl
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

Born in Malaysia and raised in Australia, 33-year-old Guy Sebastian has been a consistent hitmaker since his victory on *Australian Idol* back in 2003. Since winning *Idol*, he has had a dozen Top Ten singles to his name, as well as collaborations with artists like Lupe Fiasco, Eve, 2 Chainz, and many others. Outside of the studio, Guy works with a number of charities, such as the Australian Red Cross, World Vision, the Royal Flying Doctor's Service, and many others.

Australia in Eurovision

Appearances: 1
Debut: 2015
Victory: -
Best: -
Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier to the Final.

Recent History

2014: -

2015 National Selection

In what was quite possibly the biggest surprise of the 2015 Eurovision season, it was announced on February 10th that Australian broadcaster SBS would send an entry to this year's Grand Final, following over thirty years of loyally watching the contest from afar. Both the singer and song were selected internally, with Guy Sebastian being unveiled as the representative on March 4th, and his song "Tonight Again", written especially for the event, released on March 16th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Somewhere in Denmark, Basim is listening to 'Tonight Again' and wondering why he couldn't have sung that last year. The simple answer is that DR, like everyone else, can spot a winning song a mile away and didn't want back to back Contests. Which leaves 'a very special guest star' to sing this slice of modern R&B that could easily grace the US charts. How well this song will do at the Contest is always going to be diluted by the fact that it is Australia - will a high score be down to the song or the novelty?

If it's all about the song, this deserves a podium place, and would be one of my three potential winners.

Samantha says...I'm not going to lie to you; I had some major misgivings about having Australia join us. Not because "it's not Europe", or because "it would open the door to China/the US/Mars entering". After the 2014 Aussie interval act, I was worried that SBS would take the piss out of our beloved ESC. Much to my relief, when Guy Sebastian was announced, I knew that they would be taking it seriously. "Tonight Again" might have been thrown together in the eleventh hour, but it sounds like it was tailor made for the contest. It's energetic, catchy, and fun, without *making* fun.

SBS, I'm sorry I doubted you.

Your Notes

Austria

At a Glance

Song: I Am Yours
Artist: The Makemakes
Composer: Jimmy Harry and The Makemakes
Lyricist: Jimmy Harry and The Makemakes
Performing: 14th in the Grand Final

About the Artist

Named for the dwarf planet Makemake (which was in turn named for the creator deity in the mythology of Easter Island), this year's Eurovision representatives for Austria are Dominic "Dodo" Muhrer (vocals), Markus "Max" Christ (bass) and Florian "Flo" Meindl (drums). With a handful of hits on the Austrian charts, the band even opened up for Bon Jovi when they were performing in Vienna in 2013.

Austria in Eurovision

Appearances: 48

Debut: 1957

Victory: 2

- 1966, 2014

Best: 1st

- 1966: Merci Cherie, by Udo Jurgens, with 31 points

- 2014: Rise Like a Phoenix, by Conchita Wurst, with 290 points

Semi Finals: Automatically qualified to final in 2004, but missed out in 2005 and 2007.

Withdrew from 2008. Returned and qualified in 2011. No qualification in 2012, 2013. Qualified in 2014.

Recent History

2014: Rise Like a Phoenix, by Conchita Wurst, 1st with 290 points

2013: Shine, by Natalia Kelly, 14th in the semi with 27 points.

2012: Woki Mit Deim Popo, by Trackshittaz, 18th in the semi with 8 points.

2011: The Secret is Love, by Nadine Beiler, 18th with 64 points.

2015 National Final

Following the internal selection that brought Conchita Wurst to Eurovision last year, broadcaster ORF decided to return to a National Final system, "*Wer singt für Österreich?*" Sixteen artists were narrowed down to six for the Final, and after a 2-song Superfinal, The Makemakes took the win over Dawa by a score of 78% to 22%.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...If one beard means we win Eurovision, what happens if we send three beards? 'I'm yours' is back to form for Austria, sending a track that feels like it would be really popular ten years ago. I can hear bits of Joe Cocker, Tim Minchin, Joan Armatrading, and Billy Joel in here. It's a sweet song that doesn't quite feel right for Eurovision, but with Patrick Dempsey having left Grey's Anatomy the chances of 'I'm Yours' being played over a McDreamy Flashback mean 'The Makemakes' fall back to the Song Contest.

Samantha says...Ah, the blessing and curse of being the host's entry. You can tell that the broadcaster, whether it's ORF, DR, or even Ítimai, want to send a respectable song, but are scared crapless of winning (hosting/organizing/paying) again. "I Am Yours", much like "Cliche Love Song" or "You", is a quality song what will undoubtedly have its fans, but is unlikely to trouble the podium in the end. I get shades of late Beatles ("Let it Be", anyone?), which is simply comforting. And you know what? That's fine.

Your Notes

Azerbaijan

At a Glance

Song: Hour of the Wolf

Artist: Elnur Hüseynov

Composer: Nicolas Rebscher, Nicklas Lif, Lina Hansson

Lyricist: Sandra Bjurman, Nicolas Rebscher, Nicklas Lif, Lina Hansson

Performing: 11th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

28-year-old Elnur was actually born in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, but moved to Baku at a young age. In 2008, Elnur, alongside Samir Javadzadeh, were selected to represent Azerbaijan in their Eurovision debut, taking “Day After Day” to 8th place in the Final. Since then, Elnur has dabbled in theatre, playing Phoebus in the Azeri staging of Notre-Dame de Paris. Most recently, he took home the title of “The Voice of Turkey”.

Azerbaijan in Eurovision

Appearances: 8

Debut: 2008

Victory: 2011

Best: 1st

- 2011: Running Scared, by Ell and Nikki, with 221 points

Semi Finals: Qualified 2008-2014

Recent History

2014: Start a Fire by Dilara Kazimova, 22nd with 33 points

2013: Hold Me, by Farid Mammadov, 2nd with 234 points

2012: When the Music Dies, by Sabina Babayeva, 4th with 150 points

2011: Running Scared, by Ell and Nikki, 1st with 221 points

2015 Selection

Changing tactics from the last few years, Azerbaijani broadcaster İctimai went for an internal selection over a national final, selecting 2008 Eurovision alum Elnur Hüseynov. He was announced as Azerbaijan's entrant on March 15th, 2015.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... This is my earworm of the year. It is powerful and restrained, it builds up wonderfully both in the vocals and in the instrumentation, and in Elnur Huseynov the glorious republic has found a charismatic singer. It might not be instantaneous enough, but I suspect that the Azeri staging will bring the immediate wow factor to television screens across Europe. That should be enough to put this Top Ten, and even if it goes no further I know I'm going to be listening to this a lot after May 23rd.

Samantha says... Well, if you can't get Turkey back into the fray, may as well get the Voice of Turkey. It's pretty interesting to see how Elnur has changed since we saw him in feathers and blue contacts in Belgrade. That being said, while his vocals are fantastic, his range is mahoosive, and you know that the Azerbaijani delegation will throw some sort of magnificent gimmick at the staging, there's something about this that leaves me cold. It seems almost clinical, in the way that many Swedish productions are. It has finesse and refinement, but I finish listening and crave more grit.

Your Notes

Belarus

At a Glance

Song: Time
Artist: Uzari & Maimuna
Composer: Yuri Navrotsky, Svetlana Geraskova
Lyricist: Yuri Navrotsky, Svetlana Geraskova
Performing: 11th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Uzari (born Yuri Navrotzky) is a 23-year old singer and songwriter from Minsk. At Eurovision 2011, he performed as one of Anastasiya Vinnikova's backing singers for her performance of "I Love Belarus" in Düsseldorf, and since then he had attempted to represent his homeland twice: with "The Winner" in 2012 and "Secret" in 2013. He also co-wrote "Sokal", the 2014 Junior Eurovision entry performed by Nadezda Misyakova.

Maimuna Amadu Murasjko was born in Saint Petersburg to a Belarussian mother and Malian father. After moving to Belarus, she picked up the violin and quickly started winning awards, including (at the age of ten), the Young Virtuoso Award in Kiev. She has also served as First Violinist in Belarus's Presidential Orchestra. Maimuna released an LP, "Queen of Africa", in 2012, followed by a full album, "Showtime", in 2014.

Belarus in Eurovision

Appearances: 12
Debut: 2004
Victory: -
Best: 6th
- 2007: Work Your Magic, by Dmitry Koldun with 145 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2007, 2010, 2013-2014

Recent History

2014: Cheesecake, by Teo, 16th with 43 points
2013: Solayoh, by Alyona Lanskaya, 16th with 48 points
2012: We Are the Heroes, by Litesound, 16th in the semi with 35 points
2011: I Love Belarus, by Anastasia Vinnikova, 14th in the semi with 45 points

2015 National Final

Following a call for submissions from the public, fifteen songs were selected to take part in Belarus's National Final, held on December 26th, 2014. The decision was primarily in the hands of a seven-member professional jury, with a local televote acting as the eighth voice. Despite coming in third place with the public, Uzari and Maimuna won the favor of the jurors, taking the ticket to Vienna over a number of popular acts, including one written by Eurovision champion Alexander Rybak, "Accent".

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... 'Time' needed to decide what it wanted to be. Did it want to be a dance/club chart hit with a driving beat, did it want to be modern folk classic, or did it want to throw a bit of rock and roll swagger on stage. Three minutes is not long, and if you have the basics muddled up, it's hard to show a coherent vision. There are lots of great moments in here, but the sum is lesser than the parts.

Samantha says... While on the surface, I enjoy "Time", I'm missing what could have been. Maimuna could have been Eurovision's answer to Lindsey Stirling, and in the original mix, it sounded like it was potentially going that way. However, Belarus's inevitable revamp seems to have softened her impact, which is a shame, since she technically is billed as an equal duet partner, not as "Uzari feat. Maimuna".

Your Notes

Belgium

At a Glance

Song: Rhythm Inside
Artist: Loïc Nottet
Composer: Loïc Nottet
Lyricist: Beverly Jo Scott
Performing: 3rd in Semifinal One

About the Artist

19-year-old Walloon singer Loïc Nottet came to fame after coming in second place in the third season of *The Voice Belgique*. He caught the eye of B.J. Scott, who not only coached him throughout the duration of the show, but eventually served as the lyricist for “Rhythm Inside”. He has yet to release a debut album, but his cover of Sia’s “Chandelier”, released on Youtube this past October, was met with acclaim, including from Sia herself.

Belgium in Eurovision

Appearances: 57
Debut: 1956
Victory: 1
- 1986
Best: 1st
- 1986: J’aime La Vie, by Sandra Kim, with 176 points
Semi Finals: Auto-qualified in 2004, and qualified in 2010, 2013. Did not qualify between 2005-2009, 2011-2012, and 2014.

Recent History

2014: Mother, by Axel Hirsoux, 14th in the semi with 28 points.
2013: Love Kills, by Roberto Bellarosa, 12th with 71 points
2012: Would You?, by Iris, 17th in the semi with 16 points
2011: With Love, by Witloof Bay, 11th in the semi with 53 points

2015 Selection

Loïc Nottet was revealed as RTBF’s internal choice for Eurovision on November 3rd, 2014, and “Rhythm Inside” was unveiled on March 10th, 2015.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Modern, edgy, and not for me. I just can't find a way into this song that lets me love it. I can appreciate the technicality, I can hear what Nottet is trying to achieve, and I'm told by others that this is the bees knees and is the sort of refreshing sound that Eurovision needs. I'll trust their judgement, but for me this feels like a demo in need of a bit more production to make it more accessible.

Samantha says...(Every year, there's at least one entry that I adore that Ewan just doesn't seem to get. It happened with Compact Disco, Margaret Berger, and the Common Linnets. I haven't read his review for Belgium yet, but my intuition's telling me this will be our sticking point this year.) I think this is sleek, sexy, modern, and a major upgrade for Belgium, considering the Oedipal fantasy they sent last year. For those of us craving something more current on the Eurovision roster, we finally have something to write home about.

Your Notes

Cyprus

At a Glance

Song: One Thing I Should Have Done
Artist: Giannis ("John") Karagiannis
Composer: Mike Connaris
Lyricist: Mike Connaris
Performing: 15th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Giannis Karagiannis (who, for the sake of simplicity, will use the anglicized "John" at Eurovision) is a 20-year-old native of Limassol. In his younger years, he tried twice to represent his homeland at Junior Eurovision, coming as close as 3rd place in the 2008 preselection with "Ta logia pou piran fotia". Since then, he's been honing his craft as a singer and songwriter, having been accepted to the prestigious Berklee College of Music. In his spare time, he's a dedicated gamer and devotee of World of Warcraft.

Cyprus in Eurovision

Appearances: 32
Debut: 1981
Victory: -
Best: 5th

- 1982, Mono i agapi by Anna Vissi with 85 points
- 1997, Mana mou by Hara & Andreas Constantinou with 98 points
- 2004, Stronger Every Minute by Lisa Andreas with 170 points

Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2010, and 2012. Automatically qualified in 2005 via high placement. Did not qualify from 2006-2009 and 2013.

Recent History

2014: -
2013: An me thimase by Despina Olympiou, 15th in the semi with 11 points
2012: La La Love by Ivi Adamou, 16th with 65 points
2011: San aggelos s'agapisa by Christos Mylordos, 18th in the semi with 16 points

2015 National Final

After taking a year off from the Contest, Cypriot broadcaster CyBC returned to a National Final format, using the public to select both song and artist for the first time since 2010. The "Eurovision Song Project" aired six audition shows, two semifinals, and one six-song final, where a 50/50 jury/televote split selected Giannis Karagiannis and "One Thing I Should Have Done".

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Cyprus' last effort was a solo singer on stage with smart framing and camera work. The island returns with almost the same formula, except instead of a statuesque stunning model, it has sent the puppy-dog expression-fuelled John Karayiannis. This should be a qualifier if all he did was walk on, sing the a cappella line, and wait for every woman in Europe to stop what they were doing and give him a hug. Thankfully the rest of the song is up to that same high standard.

Samantha says...I adore Cyprus this year. It's simple, unpretentious, and vulnerable, and as we've seen with Tom Dice, ByeAlex, and Carl Espen, sometimes that works wonders. That tiny acapella breakdown at near the end has the potential to be a real "moment", for lack of a better term. It's great to see Cyprus back, especially with something as elegant as this.

Your Notes

Czech Republic

At a Glance

Song: Hope Never Dies
Artist: Marta Jandová & Václav Noid Barta
Composer: Václav Noid Barta
Lyricist: Tereza Šoralová
Performing: 8th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Marta Jandová is best known as the lead singer of the German alt-metal band “Die Happy”, which has released over a dozen albums since their founding in 1993. She is also a two-time alum of the Bundesvision Song Contest, winning the event in 2007 with the song “Träumst Du?”, a collaboration with the band Oomph!. Furthermore, Marta served as a juror on the ninth series of “Popstars”, which aired on ProSieben in 2010.

Václav Noid Barta is a singer, songwriter, and actor. His self-titled album was released in 2013, and he has also composed music for a number of Czech film soundtracks.

Czech Republic in Eurovision

Appearances: 4
Debut: 2007
Victory: -
Best: 18th in the semi
- 2008: Have Some Fun by Tereza Kerndlová with 9 points
Semi Finals: Have not qualified

Recent History

2014: -
2013: -
2012: -
2011: -

2015 National Selection

On November 19th, 2014, the EBU and broadcaster ČT made the announcement that the Czech Republic would return to the contest for the first time since their “nul points” effort in 2009. Marta Jandová and Václav Noid Barta were announced as the Czech entrants at the end of January, and “Hope Never Dies” was released on March 10th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...They do rock. They do rock really well. In a sea of ballads, all the Czech Republic had to do was choose something with a bit of fire and brimstone and let the tempo push them towards Saturday night. Instead we have a power ballad with performs that are itching to break out into 'Paradise by the Dashboard Light' but have no choice but to mimic 'All By Myself'.

Samantha says...like Armenia, I'm feeling the issue where you have two (or more) voices that just don't coalesce in the way we'd hope. It almost feels like a high school musical, in which the two romantic leads are both great singers, but they're too busy jockeying for position that they forget to blend together. In the end, this just becomes another ballad, and not one with vocal fireworks or anything truly memorable.

Your Notes

Denmark

At a Glance

Song: The Way You Are
Artist: Anti-Social Media
Composer: Remee, Chief 1
Lyricist: Remee, Chief 1
Performing: 13th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Philip Thornhill, Nikolaj Tøth, David Vang and Emil Vissing aim to create a modern sound that channels the classic pop-rock of acts like the Beatles. Anti Social Media is a young band in both senses of the word; two of its members are still in their teens, and the group only formed shortly before the Dansk Melodi Grand Prix!

Denmark in Eurovision

Appearances: 44
Debut: 1957
Victory: 3
- 1963: Dansevise by Grethe and Jørgen Ingmann, with 42 points
- 2000: Fly on the Wings of Love by The Olsen Brothers, with 195 points
- 2013: Only Teardrops by Emmelie de Forest, with 281 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2005, 2006, 2008-2013, automatic qualifier in 2014

Recent History

2014: Cliché Love Song, by Basim, 9th with 74 points
2013: Only Teardrops, by Emmelie de Forest, 1st with 281 points
2012: Shouldve Known Better, by Soluna Samay, 23rd with 21 points
2011: A New Tomorrow, by A Friend in London, 5th with 134 points

2015 National Final

The Dansk Melodi Grand Prix 2015, held on February 7th in Aalborg, saw ten entrants compete for the ticket to Vienna. A few familiar faces were as amongst the performers and songwriters, including 2005 Junior Eurovision alumna Anne Gadegaard, Arash Labaf, who sang for Azerbaijan in 2009, six-time Eurovision composer Bobby Ljunggren, Lise Cabble (composer of “Only Teardrops”, among other Danish entries), and Thomas G:son, who co-wrote “Euphoria”, as well as nearly a dozen other entries for Eurovision and JESC. In the end, after a series of regional juries and public televote had their say, it was Anti Social Media who took the win.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...As the National Finals selected their songs, Denmark's song kept climbing up my personal rankings - not because it improved but because every other song seemed to be not as good as this throwback to the early days of the Merseybeat sound. Yet the visuals don't match up for me - this needed Hamburg era Beatles with slick hair and leather, and not Marvin Berry and the Starlighters from back to the Future.

Samantha says...Over the years, Denmark has gotten really, really good at sending happy-clappy pop or pop-rock entries that are completely inoffensive, and completely vanilla. "All Night Long", "Believe Again", "New Tomorrow", even "Cliche Love Song". They do generally well on the scoreboard, but they're not the entries we're talking about a few years down the road. And the Armenian Junior entrants from 2012 already locked down the Beatles tribute market at Eurovision. (Everybody, sing it with me! *Baby, sweetie baby...*)

Your Notes

Estonia

At a Glance

Song: Goodbye to Yesterday
Artist: Elina Born & Stig Rästa
Composer: Stig Rästa
Lyricist: Stig Rästa
Performing: 7th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Stig Rästa, aged 35, is a well-established name on the local music scene. Through his work with bands such as Vanilla Ninja, Slobodan River, Traffic, and Outloudz, he has become one of Estonia's most prolific singers, songwriters, and producers. He has twice been runner-up at Eesti Laul: in 2009 with Traffic ("See päev"), and in 2011 with Outloudz ("I Wanna Meet Bob Dylan"), but 2015 sees him attending his first Eurovision.

20-year-old Elina Born first came to fame on *Eesti otsib superstaari*, the local edition of *Pop Idol*. After covering hits like "Skyfall", "Nothing Compares 2 U", and "Cry Me a River" on the show, she took the runner-up spot. Soon after, she took part in Eesti Laul with "Enough", written and composed by Stig Rästa. The two have been collaborating ever since.

Estonia in Eurovision

Appearances: 21
Debut: 1994
Victory: 1
- 2001: Everybody by Tanel Padar Dave Benton & 2XL, with 198 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2009, 2011-2013. Did not qualify in 2010 and 2014.

Recent History

2014: Amazing, by Tanja, 12th in the semi with 36 points
2013: Et Uus Saaks Alguse, by Birgit, 20th with 19 points
2012: Kuula, by Ott Lepland, 6th with 120 points
2011: Rockefeller Street, by Getter Jaani, 24th with 44 points

2015 National Final

Over 200 songs were submitted to the 2015 edition of Eesti Laul, with twenty making it to the televised semifinals, held on February 7 and 14. Half of those songs qualified to the Final the following week, when a combined jury and public televote chose a trio of superfinalists, who would be subjected to another televote to determine the eventual winner. "Goodbye to Yesterday" took an unprecedented 79% of the superfinal vote, claiming the win over Daniel Levi's "Burning Lights" and Elisa Kolk's "Superlove".

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...The classic storytelling song, opening with a doomed relationship that gets progressively worse. It stormed the voting at Eesti Laul, but it's going to be harder to cut through the hype in Vienna. Thankfully the song is up to the job, with a delightful layering of instrumentation contrasting with itself and our two singers. The question will be if Stig and Elina can connect to the audience while still portraying a break-up. If they can manage that, a strong Top Ten finish for Estonia is possible.

Samantha says...It's always nice to see a romantic duet that distances itself from sappy-eyed saccharine, and embraces dysfunctional relationships and their deterioration. Stig and Elina have been collaborating in Estonia for a few years, so they have an inherent sense of trust between them. However, as much as I LOVE this song musically and thematically, Stig's cool, almost detached style of performance could be a hindrance as he tries to connect with millions of viewers at home. I want this to hit the podium, and with the right staging, it can, but I do see speed bumps ahead.

Your Notes

FYR Macedonia

At a Glance

Song: Autumn Leaves
Artist: Daniel Kajmakoski
Composer: Joacim Persson
Lyricist: Joacim Persson
Performing: 8th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Daniel Kajmakoski was born near the shores of Lake Ohrid, but he has been calling Vienna home since childhood. In 2014, he won X-Factor Adria, where Željko Joksimović served as his mentor, and only a few months later, he took the win at SkopjeFest with "Lisja esenski", which would eventually be translated into "Autumn Leaves".

FYR Macedonia in Eurovision

Appearances: 16
Debut: 1998
Victory: -
Best: 12th
- 2006: Ninanajna by Elena Risteska, with 56 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004-2007, 2012. Did not qualify in 2008-2011 or 2013-2014.

Recent History

2014: To the Sky, by Tijana
2013: Pred Da Se Razdeni, by Esmā & Lozano, 16th in the semi with 28 points
2012: Crno I Belo, by Kaliopi, 13th with 71 points
2011: Rusinka, by Vlatko Ilievski, 16th in the semi with 36 points

2015 National Final

For the first time since 2011, broadcaster MRT eschewed internal selections and returned to Skopje Fest as the method of selecting the nation's representative at Eurovision. In the first national final of the 2015 preselection season, twenty songs were performed, including entries by ESC alums Tamara Todevska and Vlatko Ilievski. In the end, after the international jury and public televote were tabulated, Daniel Kajmakoski's "Lisja esenski" was declared the victor.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...In time this style of song may become the Balkan Ballad style, but for now it feels stuck in two camps - trying to appeal to the same voters that pushed Kajmakoski through to win the local edition of the X-Factor, but also to appeal to the younger diaspora with the ballads that they grew up with. There are moments in the song that work, but the contrast creates an uncomfortable melody which loses the authentic feel that diasporic appeal needs.

Samantha says...When I first heard “Lisja esenski”, I was worried that Macedonia had simply gone for a standard Big Balkan Ballad. However, when the language and arrangement were revamped, it became a more universal entry with shades of R&B. When I played this for some friends at my Preview Party, they absolutely loved it, calling it current and contemporary. While I mourn the loss of non-English language songs at Eurovision, Macedonia made the right choice.

Your Notes

Finland

At a Glance

Song: Aina Mun Pitää
Artist: Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät
Composer: Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät
Lyricist: Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät
Performing: 5th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät (which, for the sake of brevity, we'll just write as PKN) was founded in 2009. Members Pertti Kurikka (guitar), Kari Aalto (vocals), Sami Helle (bass), and Toni Välitälo (drums) crossed paths due to their involvement in Lyhty, an organization for adults with developmental impairments. All four members have been diagnosed either with Downs Syndrome or Autism. Since 2009, they've released a half-dozen EPs and have toured extensively; their experiences at home and on the road formed the basis of the 2012 documentary "*The Punk Syndrome*".

Finland in Eurovision

Appearances: 49
Debut: 1961
Victory: 1
- 2006: Hard Rock Hallelujah by Lordi, with 292 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2006-2011, 2013-2014

Recent History

2014: Something Better, by Softengine, 11th with 72 points
2013: Marry Me, by Krista Siegfriids, 24th with 13 points
2012: När Jag Blundar, by Pernilla, 12th in the semi with 41 points
2011: Da Da Dam, by Paradise Oskar, 21st with 57 points

2015 National Final

Since 2012, Finland has turned to *Uuden Musiikin Kilpailu* to select their song for Eurovision. After three six-song semifinals, nine qualifiers faced off for the ticket to Vienna. 90% of the result was determined via public televote, with the remaining 10% determined by a series of juries representing groups of people from all over Finland (children, cab drivers, the LGBT community, Swedish-speaking Finns, musicians, journalists, , Eurovision fans, and members of the Martha Organization). While the juries favored pop band Satin Circus, the public televote heavily leaned towards PKN, giving them the victory.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...The CD version is 1 minute 28 seconds long. PKN has enough time to play the song twice and still come in under the three minute mark. Standing on the Eurovision stage and playing your song twice? That's the punk attitude that PKN bring to Eurovision, and long may it survive. Failing that, please just get through to Saturday night, so we have something that's not a ballad?

Samantha says...I honestly don't know enough about punk to say how well this fits in with the genre, but I do appreciate when a song comes to Eurovision and turns the fandom on its head. Do I think this will win? No. Lordi was a shock entry, but it stuck to a classic formula. This is something completely different for the Contest, and it's so hard to gauge how people will react to it. And if they vote for/against it, is it because of the song, the stand-out nature of it, or PKN's back story?

Your Notes

France

At a Glance

Song: N'oubliez Pas
Artist: Lisa Angell
Composer: Michel Illouz, M. Albert (Robert Goldman)
Lyricist: M. Albert, Laure Izon
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

A singer since childhood, 46-year-old Lisa Angell made her living singing at piano bars along the Côte d'Azur until a 2009 meeting with television host Patrick Sébastien changed her life. He put her on his show, *Les années bonheur*, and produced her first album, *Les Divines*, released in 2011. Since then, she's released two additional albums, "*Des mots...*" and "*Frou-Frou*".

France in Eurovision

Appearances: 58
Debut: 1956
Victory: 5
- 1958: Dors mon Amour by Andre Cleaveau, with 27 points
- 1960: Tom Pillibi by Jacqueline Boyer, with 32 points
- 1962: Un Premier Amour by Isabelle Aubret, with 26 points
- 1969: Un Jour Un Enfant by Frida Boccara, with 18 points
- 1977: L'oiseau et l'enfant by Marie Myriam, with 136 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2014: Moustache, by Twin Twin, 26th with 2 points
2013: L'enfer Et Moi, by Amandine Bougeois, 23rd with 14 points
2012: Echo (You and I), by Anggun, 22nd with 21 points
2011: Sognu, by Amaury Vassili, 15th with 82 points

2015 National Final

Following 2014's last-place finish (the worst result in the country's 57 participations), control of France's Eurovision participation moved from broadcaster France 3 to France 2, and reverted to an internal selection, as opposed to the national final of the previous year. On January 23, France 2 announced that Lisa Angell would perform in Vienna, with an homage to the First World War.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... If it was 1985 this could easily finish second. For Eurovision fans of a certain age this song screams classic Eurovision and I'm not surprised that the preview concert audiences have went wild for Lisa Angell. I suspect the television audience across the continent will not be so forthcoming. The technicality of the performance might save it with a strong jury vote, but this feels anchored to the right hand side of the table.

Samantha says...there is absolutely nothing wrong with this song. Lisa sings it beautifully, it's got a strong message (if you can understand French, that is), and its arrangement is lovely. This feels more "timeless" than "dated", but considering how France has been performing on the scoreboard as of late, I worry that this will lack the impact needed to really rack up points.

Your Notes

Georgia

At a Glance

Song: Warrior
Artist: Nina Sublatti
Composer: Nina Sublatti, Thomas G:son
Lyricist: Nina Sublatti
Performing: 16th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Singer, songwriter, and model Nina Sublatti was born in Moscow, but moved back to Georgia as an infant. In 2011, she started a collaboration with Bera Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream Studio, but her big break came in 2013, when she won *Saqartvelos Varskvilavi*, the local edition of *Idol*. She released her debut album, "*Dare to Be Nina Sublatti*" the following year. She is currently a student at the Vano Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatory, focusing on music technology.

Georgia in Eurovision

Appearances: 8
Debut: 2007
Victory: -
Best: 9th
- 2011: One More Day by Eldrine, with 110 points
- 2010: Shine by Sopho Nizharadze, with 136 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013

Recent History

2014: Three Minutes to Earth, by The Shin & Mariko, 15th in the semi with 15 points
2013: Waterfall, by Nodi & Sophi, 15th with 50 points
2012: I'm a Joker by Anri Jokhadze, 14th in the semi with 36 points
2011: One More Day by Eldrine, 9th with 110 points

2015 National Final

Broadcaster GBP returned to a national final format for the first time since 2012. On New Year's Eve, the five candidates and their songs were revealed, and the public were given two weeks to mull over the entries. Following the vote of an international 5-member jury as well as the people of Georgia, Nina Sublatti was the clear winner.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Dark and moody, with an intense focus, this 'Warrior' is the warrior I would not want to cross at Vienna. Of Georgia's recent entries this is the one that I think could break out of the country and the Contest to have a life of its own after May. It certainly deserves it, because I think that it is just too dark to appeal to the voting public to have any appreciable impact on the scoreboard.

Samantha says...At least once per year, I see an entry that can best be described by a single syllable: "Grrrr!" It's typically a female-led, mid-to-up tempo song that is performed with a take-no-prisoners, kick-ass attitude, and usually falls woefully short on the scoreboard. Last year, it was Mei Feingold's "Same Heart". This year, I see Georgia's "Warrior" falling into that pattern. I hope I'm wrong, though, since Sublatti's energy and the song's upbeat tempo would be welcome at the Grand Final.

That being said, I'm still trying to figure out what "oximated" means.

Your Notes

Germany

At a Glance

Song: Black Smoke
Artist: Ann Sophie
Composer: Michael Harwood, Ella McMahon, Tonino Speciale
Lyricist: Michael Harwood, Ella McMahon, Tonino Speciale
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

Ann Sophie Dürmeyer was born in London to German parents, and relocated to Hamburg at a young age. After graduating from high school, she took some time and studied at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute in New York, performing at local clubs in her spare time. She self-produced a demo album in 2013, and soon found herself submitting an entry to NDR's wildcard competition for *Unser Song für Österreich*. The rest, as they say, is history. Her first album, *Silver into Gold*, was released in April.

Germany in Eurovision

Appearances: 59
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1982: Ein Bisschen Frieden by Nicole, with 161 points
- 2010: Sateelite by Lena Meyer-Landrut, with 246 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2014: Is It Right, by Elaiza, 18th with 39 points
2013: Glorious, by Cascada, 21st with 18 points
2012: Standing Still, by Roman Lob, 8th with 110 points
2011: Taken by a Stranger, by Lena Meyer-Landrut, 10th with 107 points

2015 National Final

Similar to 2014's selection for Copenhagen, *Unser Song für Österreich* brought together seven established German artists and one up-and-coming talent (the winner of a ten-song Club Concert round). Each artist submitted a pair of songs to the Final, and got to perform one before a public vote narrowed the eight artists to four. Those four acts then performed their second song, followed by another televote that selected two artists and their more popular song. Finally, a third round of televoting would determine the night's winner, and Germany's representative in Vienna.

Unfortunately, nothing's ever that clear-cut, and when the winner was announced as The Voice of Germany champion Andreas Kümmert (with an overwhelming 78.7% of the vote), Kümmert unexpectedly withdrew from the competition on live television, leaving Ann Sophie and hostess Barbara Schöneberger nearly speechless. In the end, Kümmert could not be persuaded, and he relinquished his title in favor of the cabaret singer from Hamburg.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... I am cursed. I spent two weeks listening to what I thought was the studio version of the song and wondering why Germany had send a two minute thirty second long track. In the end the Head of Delegation had to point I was listening at the wrong speed. I put aside the tub-thumping R&B version I had and put the official CD in place. Oh great, another emotionally heavy ballad.

Dear Germany, on Saturday night, sneak into the booth and move the dial that says 33rpm to 45rpm. You can thank me later.

Samantha says... there's something both cool and strange about this. Ann-Sophie exudes confidence in the way only someone trained in theater and experienced in performing cabaret can, but the song feels a bit dated, like an R&B song from the early 90s. This lacks the instant appeal of one of Lena's entries, but it's capably performed. It's just sort of...there.

Your Notes

Greece

At a Glance

Song: One Last Breath
Artist: Maria-Elena Kyriakou
Composer: Efthivoulos Theocharous, Maria-Elena Kyriakou
Lyricist: Vangelis Konstantinidis, Evelina Tziora
Performing: 6th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

31-year-old Maria Elena Kyriakou was born in Larnaca, Cyprus. Prior to reaching fame as a singer, her life revolved around academia (she ran an after-school tutoring program) and her three sons. However, in 2014 she won the first season of The Voice of Greece, under the guidance of Despina Vandi. Her debut album, "*Dio Ageloi Sti Gi*", is due to be released soon by Universal Music Greece.

Greece in Eurovision

Appearances: 36
Debut: 1974
Victory: 1
- 2005: My Number One by Elena Paparizou, with 230 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2014

Recent History

2014: Rise Up, by Freaky Fortune and RiskyKidd, 20th with 35 points
2013: Alcohol is Free, by Koza Mostra, 6th with 152 points
2012: Aphrodisiac, by Eleftheria Eleftheriou, 17th with 64 points
2011: Watch my Dance, by Loucas Yiorkas feat. Stereo Mike, 7th with 120 points

2015 National Final

2015 marked the first Greek Eurovision selection process undertaken by new national broadcaster NERIT, the successor to the now-shuttered ERT. In March of 2015, NERIT, along with private broadcaster MAD, held a five-song national final. After a public televote and jury weighed in, Maria Elena Kyriakou beat her competition handily, making "One Last Breath" the first female-led ballad from Greece since Anna Vissi's "Everything" in 2006.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Another time-travelling track that harkens back to Contests from yesteryear. In an era where standing out as being different risks one juror casting a negative vote and dragging the song down the score table (and potentially out of the qualifying slot in the semi finals), there are far too many countries playing it safe with technical ballads that are designed to get a middling score and into the Grand Final, where the result doesn't really matter as long as the domestic viewing figures are there.

Samantha says...Really, Greece? The one year you switch from upbeat and/or ethnic-infused entries to a dramatic ballad is the year when seemingly every other delegation does the same? Ah, well. I'll miss the trampoline-bouncing, kilt-wearing, Aphrodite-channeling energy of the past, but I have to focus on what you're actually doing in 2015. Safe, well-sung, nice crescendo, supportive voting blocs...see you in the Finals.

Your Notes

Hungary

At a Glance

Song: Wars for Nothing
Artist: Boggie
Composer: Áron Sebestyén, Boglárka Csemer
Lyricist: Sára Hélène Bori
Performing: 10th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Boglárka Csemer (better known and more easily pronounced as “Boggie”) released her eponymous first album in 2013, but it was the launch of her video for “Nouveau Parfum” the next year that launched her career locally. With over fourteen million hits on YouTube between the French and Hungarian-language versions of the song, the video highlights the hypocrisy of the constant retouching and Photoshopping of women in the media. Her second album, *All is One is All*, was released last year.

Hungary in Eurovision

Appearances: 13
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 4th
- 1994: Kinek mondjam el vétkeimet? by Frederika Bayer, with 122 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005, 2007, 2011-2014

Recent History

2014: Running, by András Kállay-Saunders, 5th with 143 points
2013: Kedvesem, by ByeAlex, 10th with 84 points
2012: Sound of our Hearts, by Compact Disco, 24th with 19 points
2011: What About My Dreams?, by Kati Wolf, 22nd with 53 points

2015 National Final

MTVA held its fourth annual A Dal, hosting a trio of heats, two semifinals, and a final, which culminated on February 28th. Thirty songs were narrowed down to ten for the Final, which went to a four-song superfinal after the votes of a four-member jury. The public then had its say among those top four, with Boggie ending up on top, and the subtle peace-anthem going to Vienna.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says..."If you've been affected by the issues in Boggie's song, please call our support helpline on...."

Samantha says...There's no chorus in this, which bothers me. It builds nicely, but even at its most dramatic, it feels too restrained. Where have I heard this before? Ah, yes..."I'd like to buy the world a Coke, and keep it company..."

Your Notes

Iceland

At a Glance

Song: Unbroken
Artist: María Ólaf
Composer: Ásgeir Orri Ásgeirsson, Pálmi Ragnar Ásgeirsson, Sæpór Kristjánsson
Lyricist: Ásgeir Orri Ásgeirsson, Pálmi Ragnar Ásgeirsson, Sæpór Kristjánsson, María Ólafsdóttir
Performing: 12th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

María Ólafsdóttir, often credited as María Ólaf, comes from the small town of Blönduós in northern Iceland. Her background is less in recording, and more in theatre; she played Louisa von Trapp in Reykjavík's Municipal Theatre, as well as the lead in *Ronja The Robber's Daughter*, based on the novel by Astrid Lindgren.

Iceland in Eurovision

Appearances: 28
Debut: 1986
Victory: -
Best: 2nd
- 1999: All Out of Luck by Selma, with 146 points
- 2009: Is It True? by Yohanna, with 218 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2008-2014

Recent History

2014: No Prejudice, by Pollapönk, 15th with 58 points
2013: Ég Á Líf, by Eyþór Ingi Gunnlaugsson, 17th with 47 points
2012: Never Forget, by Greta Salóme & Jónsi, 20th with 46 points
2011: Coming Home, by Sjónni's Friends, 20th with 61 points

2015 National Final

Söngvakeppnin 2015 brought a dozen songs to the table, with six qualifiers and a wildcard entrant making it to the Final on February 14th. Of those seven finalists, the top two after a jury and televote made it to a superfinal, where the Icelandic people would decide the victor. Fresh-faced newcomer María Ólaf defeated well-known singer and songwriter Friðrik Dór Jónsson handily, much to her surprise. Originally written as "Lítil skref", the song was translated into English as "Unbroken".

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...The switch to English exposes the lack of depth in this song. It's a pretty girl on stage, working through the three minutes with some coy looks, the occasional blush into the camera on a quiet line, and a few dance moves thrown in from Selma. Designed to offend nobody, the song is so bland it could be used as a base for the most unexciting cake in the world.

Samantha says..."Let it go...let it go..." Who else to channel the biggest family-friendly hit of the past year than a positively elfin Icelander who's adorability factor is practically off-the-charts? The biggest drawback to "Unbroken", however, is the repetition of the line "one step at a time". While I understand that swapping from Icelandic to English makes the song more universally appealing, "Lítill skref" fell on my ears more favorably.

Your Notes

Ireland

At a Glance

Song: Playing with Numbers
Artist: Molly Sterling
Composer: Greg French & Molly Sterling
Lyricist: Greg French & Molly Sterling
Performing: 2nd in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

At seventeen years old, Molly Sterling is one of this year's youngest entrants. Born in County Tipperary, Molly is a self-taught piano player who has won a host of local musical competitions, including Tipp Teen Idol in 2011, the Kilkenny Music Festival in 2012, and runner-up in last year's *All Ireland Schools' Talent Search*. Her first EP, *Strands of Heart*, was released last year, and she's working on her first full album.

Ireland in Eurovision

Appearances: 49
Debut: 1965
Victory: 7

- 1970: All Kinds of Everything by Dana, with 32 points
- 1980: Whats Another Year? by Johnny Logan, with 143 points
- 1987: Hold Me Now by Johnny Logan, with 172 points
- 1992: Why Me? by Linda Martin, with 155 points
- 1993: In Your Eyes by Niamh Kavanagh, with 187 points
- 1994: Rock n Roll Kids by Paul Harrington and Charlie McGettigan, with 226 points
- 1996: The Voice by Eimear Quinn, with 162 points

Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2006, 2010-2013

Recent History

2014: Heartbeat, by Can-Linn feat. Kasey Smith, 12th in the semi with 35 points
2013: Only Love Survives, by Ryan Dolan, 26th with 5 points
2012: Waterline, by Jedward, 19th with 46 points
2011: Lipstick, by Jedward, 8th with 119 points

2015 National Final

The Late Late Show, hosted by Ryan Turbridy, was once more the home of this year's Irish National final, but after 2014's failure to qualify, the mentor system used in years past had been scrapped. Five entrants took part, with a series of regional juries and a public televote weighing in to pick a winner. It was a close result, with Molly Sterling's "Playing with Numbers" pulling ahead with the televote, beating "Anybody Got a Shoulder?" by Kat Mahon (and written by Eurovision champion Charlie McGettigan) by a score of 104-100. Molly Sterling will now be the youngest performer on behalf of Ireland in RTÉ's Eurovision history.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... Ireland's Eurosong saw a narrow win for the 'modern folk' song as opposed to the 'classically oirsh' sound, but with a tough draw in semi final 2 it's a long night between hearing 'Playing With Numbers' and the voting lines opening. There's nothing stand-out, there's no obvious reason as to why you would vote for this song, it's inoffensiveness and gentle charms actually damage its chances. If you can't remember the song two hours later, why would you pick up the phone to help it?

Samantha says... I feel like I'm the only person who adores this entry. The lyrical content is more complex than I would have expected from a 16-year-old songwriter, and I keep getting shades of a less-angsty Tori Amos. I do realize that this is an exceptionally subtle song, and Ireland's results since Jedward have been less than fabulous, so part of me doesn't expect to see this on Saturday, but there always seems to be a simple, understated entry that sneaks through.

Your Notes

Israel

At a Glance

Song: Golden Boy
Artist: Nadav Guedj
Composer: Doron Medalie
Lyricist: Doron Medalie
Performing: 9th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

French-born teenager Nadav Guedj burst onto the scene by winning "*HaKokhav HaBa*" ("*The Next Star*"). At only sixteen years old, he is one of this year's youngest singers (beaten only by the teens from San Marino). He lists his influences as modern singers like Pharrell, Usher, Justin Timberlake, and Maroon 5, alongside classic voices like Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder.

Israel in Eurovision

Appearances: 38
Debut: 1973
Victory: 3
- 1978: A-Ba-Ni-Bi by Izhar Cohen and Alphabeta, with 157 points
- 1979: Hallelujah by Milk and Honey, with 125 points
- 1998: Diva by Dana International, with 172 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010

Recent History

2014: Same Heart, by Mei Finegold, 14th in the semi with 19 points
2013: Rak Bishvilo, by Moran Mazor, 14th in the semi with 40 points
2012: Time, by Izabo, 13th in the semi with 33 points
2011: Ding Dong, by Dana International, 15th in the semi with 35 points

2015 National Final

The second season of "*HaKokhav HaBa*", aired on commercial broadcaster Keshet, was the medium for Israeli broadcaster IBA to select its singer for Vienna. After weeks of performances, eliminations, and nearly-instant feedback from audiences, Nadav Guedj beat acts such as Avia Shoshani (who sang backup for Moran Mazor in Malmö) and the Israeli-reggae fusion act Iky Levy and the Rasta Hebrew Men to claim the title.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...It's messy, it's four songs all smashed together and held together with boyish enthusiasm and some mock traditional instrumentation in the chorus. It has no real direction, yet I can't help but smile for the three minutes that it's on the stage. Such a guilty pleasure. Also, Nadav is sixteen...honestly...

Samantha says...If Nadav is sixteen, then I'm twelve. There's a general lack of fun, ethnically-infused entries this year (Greece, you dropped the ball here), so I'm thrilled to see Israel pick up the slack. I can't help but smile when I listen to this, and it has attained the rare balance between self-awareness and annoyance (I'm looking at you, "Beautiful Song".) This is pure, unadulterated pleasure!

Your Notes

Italy

At a Glance

Song: Grande Amore
Artist: Il Volo
Composer: Ciro Esposito, Francesco Boccia
Lyricist: Ciro Esposito, Francesco Boccia
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

Piero Barone (age 21), Ignazio Boschetto (age 20) and Gianluca Ginoble (age 20) met in 2009 as contestants on the RAI variety show *"Ti lascio una canzone"*. Within a year, they had been signed to Geffen Records in the United States, contributed to "We Are the World 25 for Haiti", performed (in a non-competitive capacity) at Sanremo, and released their first album. Since then, they've released five studio albums (including two in Spanish), two live albums, a compilation, and a pair of EPs, all to critical and commercial success. In 2015, they made their debut as competitors at the Sanremo Festival, winning the event as well as the right to represent Italy in Vienna.

Italy in Eurovision

Appearances: 41
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1964: Non ho l'età by Gigliola Cinquetti, with 49 points
- 1990: Insieme: 1992 by Toto Cutugno, with 149 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2014: La mia città, by Emma Marrone, 21st with 33 points
2013: L'Essenziale, by Marco Mengoni, 7th with 126 points
2012: L'Amore È Femmina (Out Of Love), by Nina Zilli, 9th with 101 points
2011: Madness of Love, by Raphael Gualazzi, 2nd with 189 points

2015 National Final

Following last year's internal selection of Emma Marrone, RAI reverted back to using the Sanremo Music Festival as its method for selecting Italy's Eurovision flagbearer. The winner of the competition would have first right of refusal to represent the nation in Vienna. The Festival, which spanned five nights in February, brought together twenty established acts (not to mention the eight performers in the Newcomers division). The roster included a number of names familiar to Eurovision fans, including Lara Fabian (who sang for Luxembourg in 1988), Raf (who duetted with Umberto Tozzi in 1987), and Nina Zilli (who represented Italy at the 2012 Contest). When all was said and done, Il Volo took the overall win through a mix of public televote and a jury, while pop-rock veteran Nek won the "Lucio Dalla" award from the Press and Malika Ayane won the "Mia Martini" Critics' Choice Award.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Running at nearly four minutes, the San Remo winner needed some serious surgery to make the Eurovision time limit. There's a tiny danger that those familiar with the original will wonder what's going on, but there's more pace and energy now on show, and even more intimacy and immediacy. Assuming Il Volo can get the PR machine working at Jedwardian levels, this should go top three, and I can't help notice that 'Grande Amore's' predecessor which won Junior Eurovision 2014 was 'Tu Primo Grande Amore'... just a little bit of history repeating itself will do nicely.

Samantha says...I'm a bit wary of Opera at Eurovision, considering its history on the scoreboard. It has to be absolutely perfect, or it's a face-plant. However, Il Volo are tried and tested, and possibly Eurovision's most commercially successful act this year. They all have experience in musical competition (that's how they met, after all). There's drama, there's build, and there are certainly strong voices. This is certainly fighting for a podium spot.

Your Notes

Latvia

At a Glance

Song: Love Injected
Artist: Aminata
Composer: Aminata Savadogo
Lyricist: Aminata Savadogo
Performing: 10th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Aminata Savadogo was born in 1992 to a Ruso-Latvian mother and father from Burkina Faso. A singer, songwriter, and flautist, Aminata has appeared on a number of Latvian music television shows, including *Krodziņā pie Paula*, *Muzikālā banka*, *Koru kari 3*, the local edition of “Clash of the Choirs”, and *Jaunā talantu fabrika*. Last year, she took part in the Latvian National Final, *Dziesma* and came in 5th place with “I Can Breathe”.

Latvia in Eurovision

Appearances: 16
Debut: 2000
Victory: 1
- 2002: I Wanna by Marie N, with 176 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005-2008

Recent History

2014: Cake to Bake, by Aarzemnieki, 13th in the semi with 33 points
2013: Here We Go, by PeR, 17th in the semi with 13 points
2012: Beautiful Song, by Anmary, 16th in the semi with 17 points
2011: Angel in Disguise, by Musiqq, 17th in the semi with 25 points,

2015 National Final

Latvia's National Final, “Supernova”, was held over four shows: two heats, a semifinal, and a four-song final. The final four entries brought together pop, dreamlike electronica, modernized folk, and minimalist R&B. Public televotes and internet polling determined the winner, and Aminata stormed to victory, winning over 40% of the vote.

However, the biggest star of the show (other than Aminata, of course) turned out to be the Riga Beaver, whose antics warming up the in-studio crowd ended up going viral. From leading the audience in a game of “name the kitchen utensil I’m impersonating” to freestyle rapping, Riga Beaver’s castorine hijinks may have been the highlight of “Supernova” this year.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...

Did I enjoy this at the National Final? No. Do I enjoy the static staging of Aminata? No.

Can I get this song out of my head? No. Can my brain stop playing this to me at four am in the morning? No. Do I love the fact that I feel utterly connected to this song even though I have no idea why? Yes.

And that's why I love the Eurovision Song Contest.

Samantha says...Slinky, sexy, and surreal...this is the most commercial, yet innovative entry that Latvia's had in years. In some ways, it reminds me of "Euphoria" in its minimalism. So much will depend on staging, but if Latvia doesn't qualify, I don't know what they'll have to do.

Your Notes

Lithuania

At a Glance

Song: This Time
Artist: Monika Linkytė & Vaidas Baumila
Composer: Vytautas Bikus
Lyricist: Monika Liubinaitė
Performing: 1st in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

This year's performers for Lithuania show that persistence pays off. Monika Linkytė, aged 22, has been trying to go to Eurovision every year since 2010, and even attempted to sing for Lithuania at Junior Eurovision in 2007. Vaidas Baumila, whose first claim to fame was on the local talent show "*Dangus*", came in third place in 2014's National Final. He has released three albums since 2006, while Monika will be releasing her first this year.

Lithuania in Eurovision

Appearances: 16
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 6th
- 2006: We Are the Winners by LT United, with 162 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011 - 2013

Recent History

2014: Attention, by Viliija 11th in the semi with 36 points
2013: Something, by Andrius Pojavis, 22nd with 17 points
2012: Love is Blind, by Donny Montell, 14th with 70 points
2011: C'est Ma Vie, by Evelina Sašenko, 19th with 63 points

2015 National Final

Lithuanian broadcaster LRT decided to continue the precedent set in 2014, where the song and the artist were selected separately in two parallel competitions. Over the course of eight shows, twelve artists and twelve songs were narrowed down. On the night of the final show, "This Time" had been selected as the song for Vienna, but a surprise was in store: rather than having Vaidas Baumila, Monika Linkytė, and Mia go up against each other in a three-cornered contest, Vaidas and Monika were paired up as a duo. After the five-member jury and the Lithuanian public weighed in, two heads came out better than one, and Monika and Vaidas were picked as Lithuania's first Eurovision duet since Linas and Simona in 2004.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... This is how to stage a ballad. Not only is it full of energy and easy charm, Vaidas and Monika are as believable as John Travolta and Olivia Newton John on stage, and if you are looking for a song that will be a 'surprise' when it does well, this is the one. I can't help but compare it to Rollo and King, and a second place for Lithuania would be such a tonic for the Contest. It needs other songs to slip up to challenge for the win, but if you want your outside bet, this is it.

Samantha says... Fun, saccharine, happy-clappy, and cute. Not sure whether I should bob my head or fall into diabetic shock...

Your Notes

Malta

At a Glance

Song: Warrior
Artist: Amber
Composer: Elton Zarb
Lyricist: Matt "Muxu" Mercieca
Performing: 5th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

At age 23, Malta's representative Amber Bondin has already established herself in the country's Eurovision scene, having attempted to sing for the nation with every year since 2011. In 2012, she sang backup for Kurt Calleja on "This is the Night" in Baku, and helped give the country its highest score since 2005.

Malta in Eurovision

Appearances: 28
Debut: 1971
Victory: -
Best: 2nd
- 2002: 7th Wonder by Ira Losco, with 164 points
- 2005: Angel by Chiara, with 192 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014

Recent History

2014: Coming Home, by Firelight, 23rd with 32 points
2013: Tomorrow, by Gianluca, 8th with 120 points
2012: This is the Night, by Kurt Calleja, 21st with 41 points
2011: One Life, by Glen Vella, 11th in the semi with 54 points

2015 National Final

Twenty songs were in the running for Malta's National Final, held just one week after broadcaster PBS's successful hosting of the 2014 Junior Eurovision Song Contest. A number of names familiar to Eurovision fans competed, including Ludwig Galea (ESC 2004), Glen Vella (ESC 2011), Gianluca Bezzina (ESC 2013), and Daniel Testa (JESC 2008), including National Final stalwarts Deborah C, Chris Grech, Lawrence Gray, and Danica Muscat. Among the songwriters, there were submissions from 2009 Eurovision winner Alexander Rybak, "Rise Like a Phoenix" co-writer Charlie Mason, six-time Eurovision composer Gerard James Borg, five-time composer Philip Vella, and Swedish *Idol* winner Kevin Borg.

After narrowing down twenty entries to the final fourteen, the winner would be decided through the votes of a five-person jury and the Maltese audience, who would be weighted as a sixth jury member. In the end, the result was unanimous, with Amber's "Warrior" winning top marks from all jurors as well as the public vote. The songwriting team of Elton Zarb and Matthew "Muxu" Mercieca not only had three songs in the Maltese Final (and an additional one in the semifinal), but they also composed the Junior Eurovision entries for Malta in 2013 and 2014.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Suffering in the fan polls by being picked back in November, Malta had a lot of time to rework Amber's dramatic 'Warrior', but rather than focus on the elements that worked, the production has pushed the orchestral elements to try and create a big sound. That's a risky move, and places a lot more emphasis on the visuals in Vienna than Amber's performance. I fear that Amber will feel small on the stage and be drowned out by the visuals and the over-produced backing track.

Samantha says...Another ballad about self-empowerment? This is capably sung, but with so many similar entries this year, I worry that Amber's just going to end up getting drowned out.

Your Notes

Moldova

At a Glance

Song: I Want Your Love
Artist: Eduard Romanyuta
Composer: Erik Lewander, Hayley Aitken, Tom Andrews
Lyricist: Erik Lewander, Hayley Aitken, Tom Andrews
Performing: 1st in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Twenty-two year old Eduard Romanyuta is actually Ukranian, but with Ukraine's absence from Eurovision 2015 and Moldova's willingness to accept applications from beyond its borders, Eduard decided to give the Moldovan selection a try. He had previously attempted to sing for his homeland in 2011 (with Berega, coming in 7th), 2012 (when "I'll Never Let Go" came in 5th) and 2013 (coming in third with "Get Real With My Heart"). He has been performing since the age of five, and has taken part in numerous festivals throughout Ukraine and the rest of Eastern Europe.

Moldova in Eurovision

Appearances: 11
Debut: 2005
Victory: -
Best: 6th
- 2005: Boonika Bate Doba by Zdob si Zdub, with 148 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009-2013

Recent History

2014: Wild Soul, by Christina Scarlat, 16th in the semi with 13 points
2013: O Mie, by Aliona Moon, 11th with 71 points
2012: Lautar, by Pasha Parfeny, 11th with 81 points
2011: So Lucky, by Zdob si Zdub, 12th with 97 points

2015 National Final

Broadcaster TRM called for song submissions from the public, with a total of 68 songs coming in (nineteen of which were from abroad). Following a live audition on January 17th, twenty-four of those songs made it to the semifinal stage. Sixteen songs eventually qualified for the Final on February 28th, where a combined jury and televote selected Eduard Romanyuta. Despite allegations of malfeasance in the televote, the result stood, and Romanyuta will be the first non-Moldovan representative of the nation at Eurovision.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...It's nice to see Ukraine have made it to Eurovision 2015, its just a shame that they had to run a false flag operation with Moldova's help to get there. Leaving behind some utter classics in the Moldovan National Final, the driving beat behind Eduard Romanyuta's obvious pitch to the Euroclub will be a welcome respite from the ballad overload if it makes it to the Saturday night. It's such a shame that there's something unwelcoming about this over-rehearsed by-the-numbers presentation.

Samantha says...*(Can we just settle on calling this the Ukrainian entry?)* There's something so sleazy and sketchy about this, I feel like I need a shower after listening. It's nice to have an upbeat number to break up the parade of mid-to-low tempo songs, but it just feels like a reject cut from the CD of a B-List 90's boy band.

Your Notes

Montenegro

At a Glance

Song: Adio
Artist: Knez
Composer: Željko Joksimović
Lyricist: Marina Tucaković & Dejan Ivanović
Performing: 4th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Nenad “Knez” Knežević has been entertaining the Balkan public since 1992, and has released eight studio albums (with another on the way) and a trio of compilations. He had previously tried to represent Montenegro at Eurovision in 2008, where he came in third, and he also attempted to represent a then-united Serbia and Montenegro in 2004, where his song “Navika” came in 17th.

Montenegro in Eurovision

Appearances: 7
Debut: 2007
Victory: -
Best: 19th
- 2014: Moj svijet, by Sergei Ćetković, with 37 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2014

Recent History

2014: Moj svijet, by Sergei Ćetković, 19th with 37 points
2013: Igranka, by Who See, 12th in the semi with 41 points
2012: Euro Neuro, by Rambo Amadeus, 15th in the semi with 20 points
2011: -

2015 National Selection

On October 31, 2014, broadcaster RTCG announced that Knez would be the flagbearer for Montenegro, following the nation's first Eurovision qualification in 2014. Knez's song, “Adio”, written by two-time contestant, four-time composer, and 2008 co-host Željko Joksimović was revealed in March.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...I know there are a lot of ballads this year, but there's only one Balkan Ballad, and it's this one. I suspect there's a bit of a grudge match going on between composer Zejlko Joksimovic and his former X-Factor protege Daniel Kajmakoski to see who can deliver a better result for the region. This is the classic play with a respected and stage-experienced singer in Knez. It's not quite an all-star superhero team-up, but there's a depth here that can gather disaposra votes on name recognition alone.

Samantha says...Ah, yes...the classic big Balkan Ballad. Knez is a huge name regionally, as is Zejlko, but I'm not sure if name recognition will be enough to lift this into the Finals. It took me at least half a dozen listens to this track before I remembered its hook, and in a contest where most nations only have 3 minutes to make an impression, I worry this might have too slow of a burn.

Your Notes

Norway

At a Glance

Song: A Monster Like Me
Artist: Mørland & Debrah Scarlett
Composer: Kjetil Mørland
Lyricist: Kjetil Mørland
Performing: 6th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Kjetil Mørland is the lead singer of the UK-based pop-rock band Absent Elk, which supported The Script and Girls Aloud on tour. Absent Elk released its first album in 2009, but Mørland has relocated back to Norway in order to focus on his solo work. His debut album is forthcoming.

Debrah Scarlett grew up with roots in both Norway and Switzerland. In 2013, she competed on the Norwegian version of The Voice, coming in second place overall.

Norway in Eurovision

Appearances: 54
Debut: 1960
Victory: 3
- 1985: La Det Swinge by Bobbysocks, with 123 points
- 1995: Nocturne by Secret Garden, with 148 points
- 2009: Fairytale by Alexander Rybak, with 387 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008 - 2010, 2012 - 2014

Recent History

2014: Silent Storm, by Carl Espen, 8th with 88 points
2013: I Feed You My Love, by Margaret Berger, 4th with 191 points
2012: Stay, by Tooji, 26th with 7 points
2011: Haba Haba, by Stella Mwangi, 17th in the semi with 30 points

2015 National Final

For the first time since 2005, Norway's Melodi Grand Prix was a one-night-only affair, with no semifinals. Furthermore, all acts were accompanied by a live orchestra. Eleven acts went head to head for four spots in the Gold Final, where the people of Norway would weigh in on their favorite. In the end, it was Mørland and Debrah Scarlett who took the win, narrowly beating out pop singer Erlend Bratland for the ticket to Vienna. Other notable names included Tor Endresen (ESC 1997), Elisabeth "Bettan" Andreassen (ESC 1982, 1985, 1994, and 1996), and Karin Park, author of "I Feed You My Love" for Margaret Berger in 2013.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Don't get me wrong, I love this song. It's dark, it's operatic, it tells a fascinating story, it is rich, it is textured... yet I think it's going to do much worse than people think. On stage I have no belief that I'm seeing an actual couple, I've yet to see them cover the twenty second instrument break without looking awkward, and I suspect that (like the UK) this is a great song that will be let down by the visuals on the night.

Samantha says...Dark, brooding, and moody. However, it took me until I saw the song's preview video before I realized its genius. Instead of a breakup song, it became a song of commiseration. That subversive twist just gave me something extra that I couldn't grab from their National Final performance. If they bring that element into their Eurovision staging, they might just have something special.

Your Notes

Poland

At a Glance

Song: In the Name of Love
Artist: Monika Kuszyńska
Composer: Kuba Raczyński
Lyricist: Monika Kuszyńska
Performing: 17th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Monika Kuszyńska is perhaps best known as the former lead singer of the pop-rock group Varius Manx, which she fronted from 2001 to 2010. In 2006, while on tour with the band, she was involved in a serious automobile accident that paralyzed her from the waist down. She is still wheelchair-bound, making her the first paraplegic singer to perform at Eurovision. Since leaving Varius Manx in 2010, she has released a solo album, *Ocalona*, and served as a coach on the local version of *Clash of the Choirs*. In 2013, she was awarded Poland's Golden Cross of Merit for her work on behalf of the disabled community.

Poland in Eurovision

Appearances: 18
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 2nd
- To Nie Ja!, by Edyta Górniak, with 166 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 200 and 2014

Recent History

2014: My Słowianie (We Are Slavic), by Donatan & Cleo, 14th with 62 points
2013: -
2012: -
2011: Jestem, by Magdalena Tul, 19th in the semi with 18 points

2015 Selection

Following the lead of Cleo and Donatan, TVP decided to repeat the internal selection that brought them to the finals last year. On March 9th, Monika Kuszyńska's "In the Name of Love" was revealed.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...A bog-standard by the numbers ballad needs a gimmick, and while I was hoping that Monika Kuszyńska would let the song be the focus, rather than her personal backstory, her interviews in the run up to the Contest lead me to think that she will be trading heavily on the wheelchair imagery on the night, rather than the power of the song. Mind you, I've listened to the song, and it would need far more power to qualify without external help.

Samantha says...Completely ignoring her physical impairment, this song doesn't do much of anything for me. Acknowledging her physical impairment, this song doesn't do much of anything for me.

Your Notes

Portugal

At a Glance

Song: Há um mar que nos separa
Artist: Leonor Andrade
Composer: Miguel Gameiro
Lyricist: Miguel Gameiro
Performing: 7th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

A piano player since childhood, 20-year-old Leonor Andrade first gained popularity as a contestant on last year's series of *A Voz de Portugal*. Since then, she has also appeared on the RTP1 telenovela *Água de Mar*.

Portugal in Eurovision

Appearances: 48
Debut: 1964
Victory: -
Best: 6th
Semi Finals: Qualified 2008-2010

Recent History

2014: Quero ser tua, by Suzy, 11th with 39 points
2013: -
2012: Vida minha, by Filipa Sousa, 13th with 39 points
2011: A luta é alegria, by Homens da Luta, 18th in the semi with 22 points

2015 National Final

Festival da Canção 2015 brought together a dozen acts, winnowed down over the course of two semifinals. Three of the six songs that qualified for the final were then selected for a superfinal, with two qualifying through the public televote and the third through the jury. Leonor Andrade's "Há um mar que nos separa" defeated songs from Eurovision alumnae Simone de Oliveira (ESC 1965 and 1969) and Adelaide Ferreira (ESC 1985).

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...I have nothing. And so, it seems, has Portugal.

Samantha says...There's something in this song that reminds me of a handful of Laura Pausini tracks from the early 2000s. Perfectly middle of the road, inoffensive, but without a ton of impact. However, if you delve into the lyrics of the entry, it's perfectly in line with any traditional Portuguese entry: themes of longing and loneliness for something lost. However, most people watching the show won't speak Portuguese...

Your Notes

Romania

At a Glance

Song: De la capăt (All Over Again)
Artist: Voltaj
Composer: Călin Gavril Goia, Gabriel Constantin, Adrian Cristescu, Silviu-Marian Păduraru, Victor-Răzvan Alstani
Lyricist: Călin Gavril Goia, Gabriel Constantin, Adrian Cristescu, Silviu-Marian Păduraru, Victor-Răzvan Alstani, Monica-Ana Stevens, Andrei-Madalin Leonte
Performing: 15th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Since forming in 1982, Voltaj has been one of Romania's most enduring and popular rock groups. They've released over a dozen albums (including compilations), and have even won the MTV Europe Video Music Award for Best Romanian Act in 2005. With "De la capăt (All Over Again)", they focus their attention on the issue of children left behind by families who have gone abroad to search for work.

Romania in Eurovision

Appearances: 17
Debut: 1994
Victory: -
Best: 3rd
- 2005: Let Me Try by Luminița Anghel & Sistem, with 158 points
- 2010: Playing with Fire by Paula Seling & Ovi, with 162 points
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2014

Recent History

2014: Miracle, by Paula Seling & Ovi, 12th with 72 points
2013: It's My Life, by Cezar, 13th with 65 points
2012: Zaleilah, by Mandinga, 12th with 71 points
2011: Change, by Hotel FM, 17th with 77 points

2015 National Final

The Romanian National Final, held on March 8th, brought ten acts together. A single round of voting, with no superfinal, was held by a jury and the local public. When the dust settled, Voltaj's "De la capăt" won top marks from both sides (beating 2006 Eurovision bronze medalist Luminița Anghel in the process) and will represent their country in Vienna.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Much like the choice to send Mandinga, Romania have gone for one of the biggest songs of the last year in De la capăt. Its worth noting that this is a slight reworking to make it a dual language song, but the appeal to the Romanian diaspora is incredibly clear. Unlike Hungary, this is how to do an issues song - you put the song and the performance first, rather than the issue and the funky PR stunts. Voltaj have the missing ingredient to a song like this...authenticity.

Samantha says...I understand the message of the song, and completely support the need to have it shared on a massive stage, it's just that this song feels so average and middle of the road that I can barely remember it once it's over and done with.

Your Notes

Russia

At a Glance

Song: A Million Voices
Artist: Polina Gagarina
Composer: Gabriel Alares, Joakim Björnberg, Katrina Noorbergen, Leonid Gutkin, Vladimir Matetsky
Lyricist: Gabriel Alares, Joakim Björnberg, Katrina Noorbergen, Leonid Gutkin, Vladimir Matetsky
Performing: 12th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Twenty-eight year old Polina Gagarina is considered one of the biggest stars in Russian pop music. She came to prominence after winning the 2003 season of “Star Factory” at the age of sixteen. Two years later, she came in third at the “New Wave” festival in Jurmala, Latvia, behind then-future Eurovision alums Intars Busulis and Tina Karol. Since then, she has released two studio albums and over a dozen hit singles.

Russia in Eurovision

Appearances: 19
Debut: 1994
Victory: 1
- 2008: Believe by Dima Bilan, with 272 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2004-2014

Recent History

2014: Shine, by the Tolmachevy Sisters, 7th with 89 points
2013: What If, by Dina Garipova, 5th with 174 points
2012: Party for Everybody, by Buranovskiye Babushki, 2nd with 259 points
2011: Get You, by Alexej Vorobyov, 16th with 77 points

2015 Selection

Following the precedent set in 2013 and 2014, broadcaster Channel One Russia decided to hold a third consecutive internal selection for Eurovision. Polina Gagarina's “A Million Voices” was released on March 9th.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Another guilty pleasure here, and I can't help feeling that if nobody knew which country a song was from, 'A Million Voices' would do far better in the final scoreboard than it will do while it is clearly labelled as being from Russia. The current trend of booing the bear (seen at last year's Contest and the 60th Anniversary show) shows no sign of abating, which is unfortunate. Eurovision is about acceptance, of understanding, and learning about other cultures - which is sorely needed in 21st century Europe.

Samantha says...Removing the knowledge that this is Russia, and any of the sociopolitical implications that come with that, Polina's voice is sunning, and you know she'll be just as good live. She's an established star, and knows how to handle herself on stage and in front of a press conference. Big, anthemic numbers tend to bring Russia into the Top Ten, booing fans be damned.

Your Notes

San Marino

At a Glance

Song: Chain of Light
Artist: Michele Perniola & Anita Simoncini
Composer: Ralph Siegel
Lyricist: John O'Flynn (Bernd Meinunger)
Performing: 3rd in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Despite being Italian, Michele Perniola was San Marino's first-ever Junior Eurovision entrant, coming in 10th place in 2013 with "*O-o-O Sole Intorno a Me*". Outside of Eurovision, he's probably best known for winning the sixth series of the Italian program "*Ti lascio una canzone*", where his interpretations of Michael Jackson classics brought the house down.

Anita Simoncini, who is actually Sammarinese, was one fifth of The Peppermints, the girl-group who represented the microstate at Junior Eurovision 2014. (Interestingly, one of Anita's bandmates was Michele's little sister Rafaella.) She turned sixteen on April 14th, making her just eligible for Eurovision.

San Marino in Eurovision

Appearances: 6
Debut: 2008
Victory: -
Best: 24th
- Maybe, by Valentina Monetta, 14 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2014

Recent History

2014: Maybe, by Valentina Monetta, 24th with 14 points
2013: Crisalide, by Valentina Monetta, 11th in the semi with 47 points
2012: The Social Network Song, by Valentina Monetta 14th in the semi with 31 points
2011: Stand By, by Senit, 16th in the semi with 34 points

2015 Selection

In the days following Junior Eurovision 2014, Sammarinese broadcaster SMRTV announced that 2015's performers representing the microstate would be two alums from JESC: Michele Perniola and Anita Simoncini. Their song, "Chain of Light", is the fourth consecutive Sammarinese entry written or produced by veteran composer Ralph Siegel.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...It feels like we have Ralph Siegel's greatest hits going on in here. There's the orchestral attack from the seventies, there's the delicate female voice that flooded the Song Contest in the eighties, the painful ballads of the nineties, and a return to the orchestral bombastic nature of Six For One at the key change . It makes for some lovely moments in the song, but it means there is no feeling of consistency throughout the three minutes. Michele and Anita - San Marino's alumni from Junior Eurovision - deserve better.

Samantha says...If I was being served any more cheese, I'd become lactose intolerant.

Your Notes

Serbia

At a Glance

Song: Beauty Never Lies
Artist: Bojana Stamenov
Composer: Vladimir Graić
Lyricist: Charlie Mason
Performing: 9th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Bojana Stamenov, age 28, first appeared on Serbian television as a finalist on the third series of Serbia's Got Talent (known locally as *Ja imam talenat!*) Since then, she's appeared on a few tracks, but has yet to record an album. She also works with the Boško Buha Children's Theatre in Belgrade.

Serbia in Eurovision

Appearances: 8
Debut: 2007
Victory: 1
Best: 1st
- 2007: Molitva, by Marija Šerifović, 268 points

Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier in 2008. Qualified in 2007, 2010-2012. Failed to qualify in 2009 & 2013.

Recent History

2014: -
2013: Ljubav je svuda, by Moje 3, 11th in the semi with 46 points
2012: Nije ljubav stvar, by Željko Joksimović, 3rd with 214 points
2011: Čaroban, by Nina, 14th with 85 points

2015 National Final

Odbrojanje za Beč (Countdown to Vienna) brought together three singers, each of whom got to perform a song written by Vladimir Graić, composer of Serbia's winning Eurovision entry from 2007, "*Molitva*". Two of the candidates, Bojana Stamenov and Aleksa Jelić, were selected internally, while the third, Danica Krstić, was selected via a sub-competition geared towards up-and-coming talent. After the three performed their potential ESC entry, a 3-member jury and the Serbian public weighed in, with both selecting Bojana Stamenov's "Ceo svet je moj". The song will be performed in English in Vienna, marking the nation's first Eurovision performance in anything other than Serbian.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...I think I preferred this if this had stayed in Serbian to be honest. I also think that they have a smashing song in here, but it takes nearly two minutes of the song to get there. The hard-core fans in the auditorium are going to lift the roof off the Stadthalle when it kicks in, but everyone at home will already be in the kitchen putting the kettle on. Sometimes a bit of focus and ruthless editing is needed. Serbia have the winning disco stomper in here, but they're doing their best to hide it.

Samantha says...Always welcome to have a disco-stomper to bring the Euroclub to its feet. I have the feeling, however, that this could be the heartbreaking near-miss that fans wail about in the same breath as “Crisalide”, “Quero ser tua”, and “Tha Ne Erotas” for years to come.

Your Notes

Slovenia

At a Glance

Song: Here For You
Artist: Maraaya
Composer: Raay, Marjetka Vovk
Lyricist: Charlie Mason, Raay
Performing: 16th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

"Maraaya" is actually not an individual, but the combined forces of singer-songwriter Marjetka Vovk and composer-producer Raay. Not only are they a team in studio, but in life; they're a married couple with two young sons. Recently, the couple have become one of Slovenia's most prolific musical acts, writing songs not only for themselves, but for other artists as well. Raay composed "Round and Round" for Tinkara Kovač last year, and the pair also wrote "Nisi sam (Your Light)" with Ula Ložar, Slovenia's debut entry at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest in 2014.

Slovenia in Eurovision

Appearances: 21
Debut: 1993
Victory: -
Best: 7th
- 1995: Priluhni mi by Darja Švajger, with 84 points
- 2001: Energy by Nuša Derenda, with 70 points
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2007, 2011, 2014

Recent History

2014: Round and Round, by Tinkara Kovač, 25th with 9 points
2013: Straight Into Love, by Hannah, 16th with 8 points
2012: Verjamem, by Eva Boto, 17th with 31 points
2011: No One, by Maja Keuc, 13th with 96 points

2015 National Final

EMA 2015 was held on February 28th, with eight acts vying for the win (including six-time ESC backing singer and 2009 Slovene headliner Martina Majerle). Two songs from those eight would be selected by a three-person jury to proceed to the Superfinal, where the ultimate decision would be in the hands of the Slovene public. In the end, "Here For You" beat "Šaltinka" by Rudi Bučar En Figoni, 57% to 43%.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Even I know headphones and lace ballroom dresses don't go together. The song is fantastic, and Slovenia have finally managed to find something which has a garnish of its bombastic female soloist style that it does so well, but now it adorns a track that by rights should see chart success in the week after the Contest thanks to digital downloads. It might not have the widespread appeal to the juries - even with the awkward violin breakdown - but if Eurovision is to evolve, we need more tracks like this please.

Samantha says...This is so incredibly fun and upbeat, and completely modern. The only thing that takes me out of the moment is the air-violinist, which my spidey-senses tell me will be on stage in Vienna. Other than that, though, this is Slovenia's best entry since "No One" in 2011.

Your Notes

Spain

At a Glance

Song: Amanecer
Artist: Edurne
Composer: Tony Sánchez-Ohlsson, Peter Boström & Thomas G:son
Lyricist: Tony Sánchez-Ohlsson, Peter Boström & Thomas G:son
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

29-year-old Edurne García Almagro first burst onto the scene in 2005, when she came in 6th place in *Operación Triunfo* (coincidentally, Eurovision 2009 alumna Soraya Arnelas came in second that year). Since then, she has released five studio albums, over a dozen singles, and even appeared as Sandy in the local adaptation of *Grease*. She's also the most recent winner of *Tu cara me suena*, in which she got to imitate Alicia Keys, Christina Aguilera, and Axl Rose, among others.

Spain in Eurovision

Appearances: 55
Debut: 1961
Victory: 2
- 1968: La La La by Massiel, with 29 points
- 1969: Vivo Cantando by Salome, with 18 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2014: Dancing in the Rain, by Ruth Lorenzo, 10th with 74 points
2013: Contigo Hasta El Final, by ESDM, 25th with 8 points
2012: Quédate Conmigo, by Pastora Soler, 10th with 97 points
2011: Que Me Quiten Lo Bailao, by Lucia Perez, 23rd with 50 points

2015 National Final

Despite TVE's success in 2014 with "Dancing in the Rain", the broadcaster decided to hold a completely internal selection for the first time since 2006. Edurne was announced as the Spanish entrant on January 14th, while "Amanecer" was officially revealed on March 1st.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Edurne's back catalogue is swimming in hard-edged pop that is flooding the charts at the moment, so my hopes were high for a strong modern Spanish entry for 2015. Even the thought of G:Son didn't damp down my hopes, surely there was an energetic schlager number that would match 'Pretty Boy' or 'Painkiller'. Instead Spain released another 'powerful woman shouting a ballad'.... hasn't that been tried before with little success?

Samantha says...So...much...drama. As much as I appreciate a big Spanish ladyballad (when sung well), it's incredibly tough to top Ruth Lorenzo or Pastora Soler's efforts from the recent past. This could have been a great opportunity for Spain to give us a sexy, upbeat pop song, but instead we get an overwrought entry with a laughable video that looks like a romance novel cover.

Your Notes

Sweden

At a Glance

Song: Heroes
Artist: Måns Zelmerlöw
Composer: Linnea Deb, Joy Deb, Anton Hård af Segerstad
Lyricist: Linnea Deb, Joy Deb, Anton Hård af Segerstad
Performing: 13th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

Måns Zelmerlöw took part in the 2005 series of Swedish *Idol*, coming in 5th place overall. Since then, he's released five albums and appeared on stage in the Swedish production of *Grease*. In 2007, he made his Melodifestivalen debut, coming in third with "Cara Mia". Two years later, he came in fourth with "Hope and Glory". In 2010, he ended up hosting Melodifestivalen alongside Christine Meltzer and Dolph Lundgren.

Sweden in Eurovision

Appearances: 55
Debut: 1958
Victory: 5

- 1974: Waterloo by ABBA, with 24 points
- 1984: Diggiloo Diggiley by The Herreys, with 145 points
- 1991: Fångad av en stormvind by Carola, with 146 points
- 1999: Take Me To Your Heaven by Charlotte Nilsson, with 163 points
- 2012: Euphoria, by Loreen, with 372 points

Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Automatic qualifier in 2013. Qualified in 2004-2009, 2011, 2012, 2014.

Recent History

2014: Undo, by Sanna Nielsen, 3rd with 218 points
2013: You, by Robin Stjernberg, 14th with 62 points
2012: Euphoria, by Loreen, 1st with 372 points
2011: Popular, by Eric Saade, 3rd with 185 points

2015 National Final

SVT's annual preselection extravaganza, Melodifestivalen, brought 28 songs together over four semifinals. The top two from each semi went directly to the Final, while the third- and fourth-placed entries went to a Second Chance round. Those eight second chance entries then went into head-to-head duels, and four would go to March 14th's Final. Måns Zelmerlöw's "Heroes" took top marks from both the international jury and the Swedish public, beating Magnus Carlsson, Eurovision 2011 alum Eric Saade, and Sami *jojkare* Jon Henrik Fjällgren.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...One of the few songs that left the National Finals with the complete package - a song with a memorable hook, an affable performer than can easily connect with the audience, and a stage show that is so arresting that the phrase "I liked the one with the bloke dancing with the wee man on the screen, I'll vote for that" is going to be repeated across Europe on May 23rd and likely send us back to Sweden.

Put aside the controversy over the video, it will be tweaked just enough to satisfy the lawyers. This is the song that has pole position. If it is performed as well as it can be, it should romp away to victory.

Just don't ask Måns to sing 'Lovers On The Sun'....

Samantha says...Sweden is just too good at Eurovision at this point. As I've said before, SVT have their selection process down to a science, with song, performance, and personality polished and honed to within an inch of their lives even before they hit a Melodifestivalen stage. It's tough enough to wrench your eyes off of Måns in the first place, but with the staging that will inevitably come, you know for a fact that SVT wants up back in Sweden again. I wouldn't be shocked if we make it to Stockholm (or Göteborg...or Malmö again...)

Your Notes

Switzerland

At a Glance

Song: Time to Shine
Artist: Mélanie René
Composer: Mélanie René
Lyricist: Mélanie René
Performing: 14th in Semifinal Two

About the Artist

24-year old singer-songwriter Mélanie René has been performing since childhood, and has been training in both musical performance and competition at academies in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. She won the Grand Prize at the 2009 George Grigoriu Festival in Braila, Romania.

Switzerland in Eurovision

Appearances: 56
Debut: 1956
Victory: 2
- 1956: Refrain, by Lys Assia
- 1988: Ne partez pas sans moi, by Celine Dion, with 137 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified 2005, 2006, 2011, 2014

Recent History

2014: Hunter of Stars, by Sebalter, 13th with 64 points
2013: You and Me, by Takasa, 13th in the semi with 41 points
2012: Unbreakable, by Sinplus, 11th in the semi with 45 points
2011: In Love For a While, by Anna Rossinelli, 25th with 19 points

2015 National Final

In accordance with Switzerland's multilingual heritage, the country's various regional networks each nominated a number of artists to perform at the national level. Francophone broadcaster RTS brought forward six names, Italian-language network RSI nominated three, and the combined forces of German-language channel SRF and Romansch-language network RTR brought nine. Following an "expert check", those eighteen songs were whittled down to the six that performed in Kreuzlingen for the National Final.

At the Final, each artist performed their potential Eurovision entry, as well as a cover of a popular song. The votes were cast, and when the numbers from the 50/50 jury-televote were tabulated, Mélanie René (from French-language channel RTS) took the win.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says...Every year there is a song so bland, so middle of the road, so average, that I'm happy to pass it by. This year it's Switzerland...

Samantha says...I can't get past the fact that this song appears to lack a rhyme scheme.

Your Notes

The Netherlands

At a Glance

Song: Walk Along
Artist: Trijntje Oosterhuis
Composer: Tobias Karlsson
Lyricist: Anouk Teeuwe
Performing: 4th in Semifinal One

About the Artist

Judith Katrijntje Oosterhuis, better known to her fans as “Trijntje” (and more easily pronounced by non-Dutch tongues as “Train-cha”), has been a mainstay on the Dutch music scene since 1990, both as a soloist and as a member of the bands Total Touch and the Ladies of Soul (which also includes ESC alumnae Glennis Grace and Edsilia Rombley). She’s released over a dozen albums over the years, and has been a judge on both *The Voice of Holland* and *The Voice Kids*.

The Netherlands in Eurovision

Appearances: 56
Debut: 1956
Victory: 4

- 1957: Net als toen by Corry Brokken, with 31 points
- 1959: Een beetje by Teddy Scholten, with 21 points
- 1969: De troubadour by Lenny Kuhr, with 18 points
- 1975: Ding-A-Dong by Teach-In, with 152 points

Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Qualified in 2004, 2013, 2014

Recent History

2014: Calm After the Storm, by The Common Linnets, 2nd with 238 points
2013: Birds, by Anouk, 9th with 114 points
2012: You and Me, by Joan Franka, 15th in the semi with 35 points
2011: Never Alone, by 3Js, 19th in the semi with 13 points

2015 Selection

In the hope of capturing lightning in a bottle for the third time running, and continuing to qualify for the Eurovision Grand Final with established Dutch hitmakers, broadcaster AVROTROS internally selected Trijntje Oosterhuis, announcing her participation on November 10th and unveiling “Walk Along”, written by Eurovision 2012 veteran Anouk, a month later.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says..."Newcastle, this one's for you!" Seriously, a song with so many way-aye-aye's really should be sung by Ant and/or Dec. Instead we get Anouk's best friend, and sister-in-law of Edsilia Rombley, with a chart-friendly medley of phrases that arrives, finds a steady tempo, and politely leaves the stage after three minutes. It's nice enough while it's on, but there's no real staying power or hook that gives it any hope of winning.

Samantha says...This is incredibly repetitive, and not in the way that gets stuck in your head. Trijntje's got a great voice and loads of confidence, so why has she been saddled with a song where she's groveling for a man's attention? Come on, girl, show some muscle!

Your Notes

United Kingdom

At a Glance

Song: Still in Love With You
Artist: Electro Velvet
Composer: David Mindel & Adrian Bax White
Lyricist: David Mindel & Adrian Bax White
Performing: Automatically qualified for the Grand Final, position to be determined.

About the Artist

Electro Velvet (Alex Larke and Bianca Nicholas) was created especially for Eurovision 2015, but the pair have been performing as individuals for quite a while. Alex is a singer, songwriter, and youth music teacher who also heads up the Rolling Stones cover band The Rolling Clones. Bianca was a contestant on both *The Voice UK* and *The X-Factor*, and released a single, "Hold on to Your Dreams", in 2011. Diagnosed with Cystic Fibrosis at a young age, she has used her voice not only to bring awareness to her condition, but also as a form of therapy, strengthening her lungs.

United Kingdom in Eurovision

Appearances: 58
Debut: 1957
Victory: 5
- 1967: Puppet on a String by Sandie Shaw, with 47 points
- 1969: Boom Bang a Bang by Lulu, with 18 points
- 1976: Save Your Kisses For Me by Brotherhood of Man, with 164 points
- 1981: Making Your Mind Up by Bucks Fizz, with 136 points
- 1997: Love Shine a Light by Katrina and The Waves, with 227 points
Best: 1st
Semi Finals: Auto-qualify (Big 5)

Recent History

2014: Children of the Universe, by Molly, 17th with 40 points
2013: Believe in Me, by Bonnie Tyler, 19th with 23 points
2012: Love Will Set You Free, by Engelbert Humperdinck, 25th with 12 points
2011: I Can, by Blue, 11th with 100 points

2015 Selection

Following the pattern that the BBC has been enacting since 2011, an internal selection was held. However, a public call for songs was made, and approximately 300 potential entries were submitted. In addition, the BBC reached out to record labels, and delved back into the BBC Introducing platform that gave us Molly last year. In the end, Electro Velvet's "Still in Love With You" was selected.

ESC Insight Thoughts

Ewan says... Congratulations to the BBC for not defaulting to a safe ballad that would finish 13th on the night. 'Still In Love With You' is a massive gamble that could go Top Ten or do a Josh Dubovie. Both Alex and Bianca are finding their feet and convincing the fans this is the real deal through the preview concerts, but the weakest part of the whole package is the BBC's insistence on staging their Eurovision songs as if it was a live concert recording instead of a theatrical song contest. It's not going to be Electro Velvet's fault when this fails to climb the scoring table - but I fear they will take the blame.

Samantha says... There is a place in the world for silly, stupid fun. If that place isn't Eurovision, I don't know what is. Yes, I'd prefer if the UK sent something more contemporary and chart-friendly, but it is what it is, and all that Electro Velvet can do is go out there, have a good time, and make sure that the viewers at home do the same.

Your Notes